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COUNTER-INSURGENCY LESSONS
FROM THE FRENCH-ALGERIAN WAR

by

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A paper submitted to the Faculty of the Naval War College in partial satisfaction of the requirements of the Department of Joint Military Operations.

The contents of this paper reflect my own personal views and are not necessarily endorsed by the Naval War College or the Department of the Navy.

Signature: _____

09 February 2004

Abstract

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The conclusion of World War II saw a number of colonial powers embroiled in counter-insurgency warfare in countries spread around the globe. These conflicts generated a great deal of research and analysis with respect to the critical elements of counter-insurgency warfare. The 1954-62 French-Algerian War was one such conflict which offers valuable lessons for U.S. planners as they conduct operations in Iraq.

There are four important aspects of French strategy which warrant closer examination. First, the French employed superb use of psychological operations at the unit level. Second, they were highly successful at gathering human intelligence. Third, they dispersed their forces through a strategy of quadrillage that separated the insurgents from the local population. Fourth, they conducted their operations using a measured response, avoiding reprisals and excessive use of force.

Though incorporation of these four elements will not guarantee military success, they have significant application for U.S. forces as they conduct counter-insurgency operations in Iraq.

COUNTER-INSURGENCY LESSONS FROM THE FRENCH-ALGERIAN WAR

Introduction

In the aftermath of World War II, European colonialism declined at an extraordinary rate throughout the world. The loss of colonial control was most often the result of a nationalistic movement using force, most often in the form of terrorism, to push the colonial power out of power. As a result, during the 40 years that followed WWII, colonial militaries devoted a great deal of study and experimentation in the type of warfare necessary to defeat an insurgency. The 1954-62 French-Algerian War is one such conflict that provides valuable lessons for U.S. military planners to consider as they conduct operations in Iraq. These lessons cover a wide range of topics, four of which will be discussed in this paper: psychological operations, human intelligence, employment of forces, and measured response.

This paper first highlights the significant events of the French-Algerian War. It then covers the four lessons mentioned above, analyzing the historical details and discussing salient points of application for U.S. military operations in Iraq. Finally, it concludes with some recommendations for consideration by current military planners.

The Context

In an effort to oust the French colonial government of Algeria, an Algerian nationalist group, calling itself the *Front de Libération Nationale* (FLN), began the war on the eve of All Saints Day, October 31, 1954. They initiated hostilities with a strike consisting of coordinated bombings, murder and sabotage throughout Algeria. The desired effect was to

ignite the passions of the native Algerian populous, but was completely ineffective in accomplishing that task. The French responded quickly with the limited force they had available at the time and easily suppressed the poorly organized insurgents. However, it was not a complete defeat, and for the first year of the war, France's official military policy was one of restraint (*répression limitée*) which effectively tied the hands of French commanders. This gave the FLN, and its army, *Armée de Libération Nationale* (ALN), time and space to grow, organize and train.¹ As the effectiveness of the FLN increased, so did the French response. French troop strength grew as indicated in Table 1:

Year	1954	1955	1956	1957
Troop Strength	65,000	110,000	390,000	415,000

Table 1²

By the summer of 1955, the violence had risen to extraordinary levels. A horrifying example of this was the massacre at Phillipville, located in northeast Algeria. On one side, the ALN forces were brutal in their tactics: disembowelment, cutting off noses, slicing mouths from ear to ear and leaving their victims, both enemies and innocent civilians, to bleed to death. In response, French troops and *colon* (Algerian civilians of French descent) vigilante groups rounded up large numbers of native Algerians and gunned them down. The ALN slaughtered 152 European and Algerian civilians, and the French reprisals claimed ten times that many. Phillipville was significant in that it bolstered support for the FLN among the native populous and polarized the two sides to the point that anything short of total victory was unacceptable. Algerian Governor General Jacques Soustelle, once a staunch liberal supporter of *répression limitée*, turned into a supporter of firm repression as he saw no

¹ Anthony Glayton, The Wars of French Decolonization (New York, Longman, 1994), 112-120.

² Ibid., 115, 117, 120.

further hope of negotiation.³

The next year saw a massive call up of French conscripts and extentions of mandatory military service from 18 to 36 months. With the increased troop strength, General Raoul Salan, who was appointed to the combined civil-military position of Resident-Minister and Commander-in-Chief in Algeria, was able to implement the very effective strategy of *quadrillage*. This involved dispersing the troops throughout the countryside in demarcated zones to conduct rapid and decisive sweeps by military patrols to kill or capture fleeing insurgents.⁴

Unfortunately, insufficient mobility detracted from effective implementation. Only 30,000 of the 300,000 *quadrillage* troops were mobile and therefore capable of pursuing ALN forces.⁵ This led to a garrison mentality among the forces, and they continued to lose ground as the ALN forces had near-complete freedom to move about the country. General Salan eventually realized that merely positioning forces in the field was insufficient to accomplish the mission, and a qualitative increase in the capabilities of the forces and the implementation of the strategy was necessary. At that point, he made three critical improvements:

1. He sought the advice of officers and non-commissioned officers (NCO) who had counter-insurgency and psychological warfare experience against the Viet Minh.
2. He approved significant changes in the syllabus at the counter-insurgency warfare training school, the *Centre d'Instruction et de Préparation à la*

³ Ibid., 119.

⁴ Martin Alexander and J. Keiger, ed., France and the Algerian War, 1954-1962: Strategy, Operations and Diplomacy (Portland, OR: Frank Cass Publishers 2002), 9.

⁵ Glayton, 120.

contre-Guérilla (CIPCG), to focus on psychological warfare vice the tactical and general military training it had been addressing previously. All cadet officers and officers through the rank of colonel who were involved in sector duties in Algeria were required to attend the school.

3. He encouraged flexibility in applying operational methods to account for the variations in geography, demographics, and threat found in different geographical locations.⁶

These changes, combined with improvements in air mobility, significantly improved the French effort. French military air power was made available in much larger numbers, with the use of helicopters being extremely effective in the vast and varied Algerian terrain.⁷ The Morice Line, a sophisticated barrier of minefields, electric fence, barbed wire and floodlights located on the Algerian-Tunisian border, was much more effective with the support of rapid response aircraft.⁸ The French Air Force also provided valuable intelligence through visual and radio surveillance and their ability to monitor vast areas of the country and pinpoint insurgent locations.⁹

The turning point in the war came in December of 1958 when General Maurice Challe succeeded General Salan. By this time, a great number of officers had received training at the CIPCG, and the psychological operations campaign was gaining the support of the local population. The troops had a clear sense of the mission and how to carry it out.

⁶ Alexander and Keiger, 11.

⁷ Ibid., 12-13.

⁸ Peter Paret, French Revolutionary Warfare from Indochina to Algeria (London: Fredrick A. Praeger, Inc, 1964), 34.

⁹ Alexander and Keiger, 12-13.

Additionally, the officers and their troops were held to a much higher level of discipline and accountability.¹⁰

General Challe was highly critical of the “garrisoning” of large numbers of troops under the *quadrillage* plan as it was being implemented. There were significant “no-go zones” in which the rebels were able to operate freely and gain control over the local population, growing the size of their guerilla army to replace any losses that they had incurred during engagements with the militarily superior French forces. He directed a much more aggressive approach, breaking down the garrisons into units that were as small as the rebel bands they were fighting and pushing them into every area of Algeria. His mobile units conducted search and destroy missions utilizing every available element of technology, including sophisticated communications, airborne surveillance and support, and motorized ground units when possible.¹¹

By mid-1960, French forces had virtually wiped out the ALN. But the FLN had been pursuing its goals for Algerian self-determination at the international level for many years, and the external pressure being applied to the French was just too great. Whereas the French had won militarily, they lost politically.¹²

¹⁰ Glayton, 154.

¹¹ Alexander and Keiger, 15-17.

¹² Ibid., 41, 45.

The Lessons

Psychological Operations¹³

Analysis

The Colonial Wars taught the French a valuable lesson, that psychological operations are the cornerstone of an effective strategy for fighting a counter-insurgency war. However, the French were slow to incorporate this lesson into their operations during the Algerian war. A key event in the turnaround occurred in July of 1957 when Lieutenant Colonel Bruge assumed command of the CIPCG. He was a veteran of World War II and the war in Indochina, including five years as a prisoner of war of the Viet Minh. He was well-acquainted with the psychological control techniques used by the Viet Minh and was adept at gauging the key “recipes” for effective psychological operations to be used with the Algerian population and against the ALN. Not until General Salan put Colonel Bruge in charge of the CIPCG did the French begin to demonstrate a real commitment to fighting the war using psychological action.¹⁴

In Lt. Colonel Bruge’s view, the insurgency had as its objectives the following:

- To cover the civilian population with clandestine structure.
- To gain a psychological grip over the population.
- To conduct terrorism by armed bands that would seek progressively to transform themselves into an army of national liberation.¹⁵

Colonel Bruge’s approach was to improve the officer’s understanding of the individual, the culture, and the insurgent. He eliminated tactical training from the CIPCG syllabus and implemented a curriculum focused on the following components:

¹³ Psychological Operations, within this paper, refers to both Psychological Operations and Civil Affairs. It can be argued that the two are very different, and they definitely are at their polar ends. However, there is much common ground in the middle, and it is to this area that the term applies.

¹⁴ Alexander and Keiger, 44.

- Muslim sociology
- Revolutionary Warfare
- The adversary and his ways
- The tactical and psychological struggle against the rebellion.¹⁶

While Colonel Bruge had command, every officer through the rank of colonel who served in Algeria was trained under the new syllabus. Over the two-year period, the CIPCG trained a total 7,172 officers and cadets who went on to apply their PSYOP training to every area of France's Algerian operations.¹⁷ It is clear that this training was a significant factor in improving the effectiveness of France's military operations and gaining support from the local population. By the end of the war, nearly one-fourth of the French force was composed of native Algerians.¹⁸

Application

Psychological operations are the cornerstone to an effective counter-insurgency strategy. The U.S. Marine Corps realized this long ago, as they dedicated ten pages of the introduction of their 1940 edition of NAVMC 2890, "Small Wars Manual," to this subject. It states:

The great importance of psychology in small wars must be appreciated. It is a field of unlimited extent and possibilities, to which much time and study should be devoted. It cannot be stated in rules and learned like mathematics. Human reactions cannot be reduced to an exact science, but there are certain principles which should guide our conduct.¹⁹

Joint Doctrine defines Psychological Operations (PSYOP) as "...operations planned to convey selected information and indicators to foreign audiences to influence their

¹⁵ Ibid., 44

¹⁶ Ibid., 43

¹⁷ Ibid., 45

¹⁸ Paret, 41.

¹⁹ U.S. Marine Corps, Small Wars Manual, NAVMC 2890 (Washington, DC: 1940),

emotions, motives, and objective reasoning and ultimately the behavior of foreign governments, organizations, groups, and individuals.”²⁰

PSYOP capability currently exists only in specialized units, organized under the U.S. Special Operations Command in accordance with joint doctrine. In a time of conflict, PSYOP units are assigned to the Joint Task Force Commander for his use in theater.²¹ Joint Doctrine highlights the critical role that psychological operations play in establishing the legitimacy of U.S. actions in the host nation as well as developing “...a sense of legitimacy for the supported government.”²²

However, Joint Doctrine does not require organic PSYOP training in basic infantry units. This is unfortunate because the ground forces in these units must understand how to operate among the people in order to accomplish the mission. They conduct psychological operations everyday, whether they realize it or not. In effect, every action with an impact on the local population is a psychological operation. When soldiers are left in the dark with respect to basic PSYOP skills, the following situations are likely to occur, as quoted from a recent press report, “[S]oldiers from the U.S. Army’s Psychological Operations unit are trying with limited success to get fellow soldiers to erase threatening messages painted on battle gear and ease their treatment of Iraqi residents during nighttime raids.”²³ This is a training deficiency with strategic implications. Officers and NCOs who lead ground forces in Iraq must receive PSYOP training so that their units operate in a manner that produces maximum dividends within the Iraqi culture.

²⁰ Joint Chiefs of Staff, Doctrine for Joint Psychological Operations, Joint Pub 3-53 (Washington, DC: 5 September 2003), ix.

²¹ Ibid., xi.

²² Joint Chiefs of Staff, Joint Doctrine for Military Operations Other Than War, Joint Pub 3-07 (Washington, DC: 16 June 1995), xi. II-5.

²³ Jason Keyset, “Playing the Mind Game in Iraq,” The Associated Press, 06 January 2004. Lkd. CBS Broadcasting, Inc. <<http://www.cbsnews.com/stories/2004/01/06/iraq/main591663.shtml>>, [06 January 2004].

Psychological warfare, to be effective, must permeate every area of military operations. For this to occur, fundamentals of psychological operations and basic PSYOP task training must be incorporated into the Mission Essential Task List (METL) for individual infantry units, down to the platoon level. They must incorporate psychological warfare into every decision, every movement, and every engagement. The native population is always watching and interpreting the unit's actions, and their perceptions will have a profound affect on the military's ability to accomplish their mission on any level.

Human Intelligence

Analysis

Whereas signals intelligence and airborne surveillance were used extensively by the French, the most valuable intelligence was derived from the local population. However, the French did not initially recognize this fact and were therefore slow to develop their human intelligence (HUMINT) capability. Furthermore, though their efforts to gain HUMINT improved over the course of the war, their methods of obtaining it have been the subject of much scrutiny. They often resorted to coercion and torture to get the information they desired. The most notorious example was General Jacques Massu and his 10th Parachute Division who admitted his use of extreme methods, including torture, in the “Battle for Algiers.”²⁴

As French conscripts completed their tour of duty in Algeria and returned to France, the horror stories of their torturous methods began to find their way into the press and became an anathema to the French population at large and, even more importantly, to the

²⁴ Alistair Horne, *A Savage War of Peace*, (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), 195.

world. As the political battle for Algeria was being fought on the world's stage, these reports spelled doom for the French cause. Toward the end of the war, as units became more skilled at psychological operations and French officers were held to higher standards of military conduct, French HUMINT collection improved as their ability to gain information through traditionally-accepted means became more effective.²⁵

Application

Intelligence is another essential element of counter-revolutionary warfare. It gives the commander the knowledge necessary to move, concentrate, attack and disperse his forces as necessary to counter the threat. As described by communist doctrine, terrorists can be compared to "fish swimming in the ocean of the people."²⁶ In order to surgically remove the insurgent forces, accurate and timely intelligence is critical.

The key to an effective HUMINT capability is to foster trust and build relationships with the local population. As these relationships grow and the local population recognizes that the insurgents are a greater threat than the military, and that the military is capable and willing to protect them, they will come forward and deliver intelligence. The French found this to be true as their HUMINT network strengthened in proportion to their ability to understand and work with the local population.

HUMINT has been a source of continual frustration to U.S. forces in Iraq because few members of the local population are willing to provide valuable intelligence. If a local is found giving information to the authorities, he or his family is at risk of being killed by the insurgents. U.S. forces have yet to win the confidence of the local population by proving they are capable of providing for the security of the Iraqi people. This is best described by

²⁵ Glayton, 154.

²⁶ Edward L. Dreyer, China at War, 1901-1949 (London: Longman Group Limited, 1995), 190.

Major John Nagl, who was in Iraq with the U.S. Army's First Infantry Division when he related this story:

"The local comes in and says, 'There's a bad guy in my neighborhood who is planting I.E.D.'s'" – improvised explosive devices – "and is an arms dealer and fires mortars at you.' Wow, that's great intel. So tell me where he lives."

"There aren't any addresses in this country. The streets don't have names, there are no street signs, there aren't numbers on houses; all the houses look the same."

Nagl said he would next offer a map or satellite image to the local and ask him to point out the house. The Iraqi, in most cases, would scratch his head.

"These clowns don't know how to read maps," he continued. "So how exactly do I find out which house the bad guy lives in? I've got to get the Iraqi in a Humvee and drive past the house and get him to point out the house – but he doesn't want his friends to see him in a Humvee. I can put him in a Mercedes and put myself in local garb, but if I do that the Geneva Conventions say I lose my rights and protections. Conventional soldiers don't usually do that sort of stuff."²⁷

Major Nagl's story is indicative of the problem in two ways. The locals have not provided intelligence because they have been afraid, while force protection concerns have kept U.S. forces from developing an intimate familiarity with the people and their environment. The insurgents have had great success at using terrorism to create fear, and this has produced a "crossfire" in which the local population is stuck in the middle. As indicated by the following quote, the people feel like they are in a no-win situation: "'Fallujah is controlled by two powers – the Americans and the mujaheddin,' Abbas said. 'If we cooperate with the mujaheddin, we get raided. If we cooperate with the Americans, we get killed.'"²⁸ U.S. forces must get out from behind their armor, gain familiarity with the local area and develop relationships with the Iraqi people who live in that area. This will create an

²⁷ Peter Maass, "Professor Nagl's War," *New York Times*, 11 January 2004: sec. 6, p. 23.

²⁸ Hannah Allam and Tom Pennington, "Troops Battle to Rid Town of Suspected Cell," *Philadelphia Inquirer*, 23 January 2004, sec A, p. 2.

environment in which HUMINT that is essential to defeating the insurgency flows from the local people to U.S. forces.

Employment of Forces

Analysis

France's employment of the strategy of *quadrillage* saw two basic stages. The first stage was the result of less than optimal implementation, while the second stage proved to be highly effective. The first stage of implementation was hindered by the garrisoning of too many static forces and an insufficient number of mobile forces. The soldiers were garrisoned in locations spread throughout the country, conducting search and destroy operations on a regular basis. They were successful at defeating the insurgents when contact with the enemy was made, but there were areas that the soldiers did not go, and it was in those areas that the insurgents were able to continue terrorizing the outlying areas and fermenting their ideology among the people.²⁹

Though their operations could technically be called *quadrillage*, it did not conform to the spirit and intent of this strategy. *Quadrillage*³⁰ was intended to deny the insurgents access to the people, therefore, the success of this plan depended on soldiers being spread throughout the country in sufficient number to deny a safe environment to the enemy. General Challe recognized this when he assumed command of France's Algerian forces. He pushed them out of their garrisons into units whose size matched that of the insurgents. When their mobile forces would clear an area, static forces would come behind and hold that territory, freeing up the mobile forces to push out ahead. The process was highly effective

²⁹ Alexander and Keiger, 13-15.

and continued until the ALN was near complete annihilation in mid 1959, just one year after adopting the more aggressive approach.³¹

Application

The objective of a counter-insurgency force, on a day-to-day basis, is to separate the insurgents from their recruiting and supply base. If they cannot get to the people, their efforts are in vain because they are too weak to pose a credible and durable threat to a strong military force. Their support base of people, food, and money will soon dry up, and their cause will wither. Therefore, effective counter-insurgency warfare should be fought on a level as small and dispersed as the insurgent, giving them no place to hide and no opportunity to draw support from the local population. If “no-go zones” are allowed to exist or units fail to hold the areas that have been cleared, the strategy will fail.

U.S forces have demonstrated that they are willing to operate in virtually all areas of Iraq. However, their conduct of operations is to send out patrols on search and destroy missions behind heavy armor and firepower, while not dispersing their forces to hold the areas that are cleared. The result is that the insurgents backfill areas that were cleared only hours or days before. As in Vietnam, it is a strategy that is capable of local tactical success, but it will not result in a lasting strategic victory.

Measured Response

Analysis

Initially, the French found themselves engaging the insurgents with a minimal response due to political restraints placed upon them by the liberal leadership of the Fourth

³⁰ The strategy of *quadrillage* was similar to the blockhouse strategy that was effectively employed by Chiang

Republic.^{32,33} As the ALN's attacks became more brutal, the French forces responded in kind. Torture and reprisals became common. Torture led to a breakdown in the moral responsibility of the French troops, which led to even more severe reprisals for killings by the ALN. One example occurred in May of 1956, when French special forces responded to the death of two of their own by killing nearly 80 Muslims in a Turkish bath. No French troops were held accountable for this massacre.³⁴ One source quoted an officer who wrote about the condition of the Army at that time, "...[E]ighty-percent of the units are dirty, slack and ill-disciplined. Their attitude to the civilian populations oscillated between supine weakness and the most reprehensible violence, pillage and collective torture."³⁵ Such actions only fueled the fire of the insurgency and improved the FLN's position in the international arena.

By mid-1958, significant improvements were occurring in the French Army. They were no longer allowed to exist as garrisoned forces as General Challe implemented his more aggressive *quadrillage* strategy. Officers who failed to be aggressive were removed, and if found responsible for "atrocities," they were held accountable. Discipline in the enlisted ranks was enforced, and with the improved training officers and enlisted were receiving, morale improved. The French Army changed its approach to fighting the ALN from simply trying to kill them to attempting to use the insurgents they captured to "root out" the FLN organization. In areas that were cleared, efforts to improve the infrastructure were initiated.³⁶

Application

Kai-shek against Mao's forces during the 5th Campaign of the Chinese Civil War. See also: Dreyer, 190-191.
³¹ Alexander and Keiger, 15-18.

³² The Fourth Republic of France existed from 1946-1958 under the fourth republican constitution. It was characterized by a weak and decentralized government.

³³ Glayton, 116.

³⁴ Ibid., 134.

³⁵ Ibid., 154.

³⁶ Ibid., 154.

The effective use of force must have four characteristics: swift, decisive, surgical and respectful. First, because insurgents rarely mass their forces, their small size enables them to rapidly blend in with the environment. Therefore, U.S. forces must rapidly respond to intelligence tips. Second, actions must be decisive, with clearly defined objectives and a well-matched ROE. Third, while being decisive, execution must be accomplished with the minimum force required while ensuring that minimal collateral damage takes place, especially when it comes to human casualties. Fourth, respect for the native population and its culture must be maintained throughout the engagement.

The heavy-handed tactics currently employed by U.S. forces in Iraq are proving ineffective in the effort to establish a lasting peace. Engagements with the enemy have frequently been characterized by excessive firepower, unnecessary collateral damage and cultural insensitivity. As mentioned earlier, Fallujah residents have reported that they are just as afraid of American troops as they are of the insurgents. Ghazi Ajil al-Yawar, deputy chief of an Iraqi Sunni Tribe and a member of the American-appointed Governing Council, was quoted recently as saying:

The United States is using excessive power. . . . They round up people in a very humiliating way, by putting bags over their faces in front of their families. In our society, this is like rape. The Americans are using collective punishment by jailing relatives. What is the difference from Saddam?³⁷

Soldiers must recognize the humanity of the local population and treat them with respect. Firm discipline must be maintained throughout the chain of command. Officers and NCOs must restrain themselves and their men from reprisals. The blame should be placed on the insurgents, not the local population. When soldiers' emotions lead them to use excessive force or act in a way that is offensive to the cultural or moral norms of the local population,

³⁷ Maass, sec. 6, p. 23.

commanders must respond quickly. Compensation to the offended parties must be handled without delay and in accordance with local customs. In addition, U.S. forces must treat them with respect, realizing that they are very possibly reluctant “trigger-pullers” recruited through fear. If handled correctly, they could become a valuable source of intelligence.

CONCLUSION:

The French learned many very painful lessons in Algeria, albeit lessons that they had already learned, or should have learned, in Indochina. Unfortunately, they were slow to incorporate them into their operations in Algeria. Such is the situation for U.S. forces in Iraq. These lessons, along with many others, are written in blood on the pages of history. It is incumbent upon U.S. operational planners to review these lessons and incorporate them into their operations in Iraq. In particular, the following areas deserve serious consideration:

- Pertinent elements of psychological operations training should be provided to officers and NCOs at the unit level. These elements should focus on areas that will enable soldiers in the field at every level to “get into the head” of both the insurgents and the local population.
- Soldiers must gain the trust and confidence of the local population by stepping out from behind their armor, removing their sunglasses, and developing relationships with the local community. It is through the development of these HUMINT “pipelines” that the counter-insurgency war will be won.
- The employment of forces should be reviewed with respect to the following two questions:
 - Are the forces being concentrated in too few garrisons to effectively deny the insurgents access to the people?

- Are operations being conducted to “search and destroy” rather than to “clear and hold?”
- Unit level officers and NCOs must understand the principle of conducting a measured response. Soldiers must understand the extraordinary set-back that comes with collateral damage and conducting operations in a manner that is culturally offensive. Reprisals should not be tolerated for any reason.

If any form of warfare requires artistic skill, certainly counter-insurgency would be at the top of the list. No two insurgencies are the same. C.E. Callwell, a 19th century British officer, called it, “invertebrate war.”³⁸ Lessons from the French-Algerian war will not provide all of the answers for achieving success in Iraq, however, it does provide some very valuable lessons, and U.S. operational planners would be remiss if they fail to consider these as they develop their plans.

³⁸ Maass, sec. 6, p. 23.

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